Aesthetic Illusion and the Breaking of Illusion in Ambiguous Film Sequences

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Film's extraordinary capacity for life-like representation and thus for aesthetic illusion operates by way of multiple levels of illusion-inducing devices. From concepts of narratology, such as focalization and diegesis, to the technical aspects of remapping three-dimensional, physical space into the two dimensions of screen space, the use of conventions such as plot, character, set, spatial and temporal continuity and 'synchronous' sound is motivated by and linked to our systems of knowledge organization and manipulation. Through such conventions, most commercial cinema offers a largely unambiguous and familiar representation of life, a compelling, imaginary film world into which audiences readily enter. Occasionally, however, filmmakers choose to fracture this illusory cinematic realism in order to serve their greater directorial concerns. This essay considers film sequences, from both commercial and experimental canons, that are ambiguous by design and whose immersive effect is intentionally disrupted by the filmmaker through a range of metafilmic techniques. I will argue that, in these cases, the techniques employed operate by destabilizing the relationship between the sensory (mainly visual) and cognitive (intellectual/emotional) registers of the receptive experience in order to fracture the initial illusion and (re)direct the viewer's attention – perhaps paradoxically – toward a deeper level of engagement in an alternative illusory aspect.

1. The Subversion of the Objectified Image and its Ambivalent Consequences for Aesthetic Illusion (Haneke, *Caché*)

The screen fades up from black to a wide shot of a residential building which stands at the junction of a narrow urban street. Two cars are parked in front of the building. A street sign attached to the white-washed wall reads "Rue des Iris" but most of the ground floor is hidden behind a large bush in the centre of the frame. Titles begin to scrawl across the screen. Unseen birds twitter through the hum of city air, accompanied by the random, distant voices of children. We watch. The titles continue, building up lines of almost illegibly small type over the image. The only easily readable word is 'CACHÉ' ('Hidden'), the title of the film which is directed by Austrian art-

Illustration 1: Frame enlargement from the film Caché. *© Caché – Michael Haneke / Films du Losange – 2005*

house filmmaker, Michael Haneke. A minute has passed. We are dimly aware of an occasional soft bump or shuffle, apparently close-by (perhaps suggestive of another space), but then the sound of footsteps attracts our attention as someone walks across the frame along the pavement in front of the building. This is the first moment of 'sync' sound[1] – that is, sound that is produced by (and therefore synchronous with) action that is visible in the frame. For the first time the audience's attention is directed towards something specific.

[1] Since the veridical quality of a cinematic replica of the lived world is, by convention, predicated, in part, on the causal link between sound and vision, this link is essential to an immersive experience of that illusory world. When this link is broken the illusion of the hermetically sealed diegesis also breaks. (The unexpectedly reversed voice of the small man on the red stage in David Lynch's *Fire Walk With Me* is an obvious example.) Ironically, however, the assumed indexical link between picture and sound is seldom genuinely causal in cinema since the sound is usually added later by a foley artist during the dubbing stage of post-production, and is not therefore 'created' by the action on screen at all. So the convincing illusion that is created by the apparently authentic link between sound and the on-screen action that causes it is in fact dependent on yet another illusion. In the case of the opening, exterior shot of *Caché*, the sound looks to be genuinely sync – as far as one can tell – although the perspectives of the microphone and of the camera are very different.

The use of sync sound is fundamental to the construction of a convincing illusion of reality in mainstream cinema. Its absence, as is the case with a silent movie, leaves the audience slightly adrift, deprived of a sensory modality and therefore dislocated and distanced from the action within the frame. Obversely, the presence of sound that has no observable, synchronous cause – for example, an atmos (atmosphere) track such as the city soundscape we hear during the opening sequence of *Caché* – can also be distancing because it offers nothing to ground us in the here and now of the observed world. In this film, the dull, semi-audible proximal sounds, which are mixed low in the soundtrack, add their own unsettling quality. Into this carefully crafted space the sudden insertion of a definite and conspicuous sync moment acts not only to draw attention but also to actively reorientate the audience onto the immediacy of the presented world.

No further specific action occurs after this brief interlude of attention-seeking, synchronous activity, so we find ourselves slipping back into simply watching and beginning to wonder what it is, exactly, that we are supposed to be interested in. Should we be noticing something particular? If so how do we know what? Even when someone walks through shot, they are not followed by the camera, nor is there an attempt to simulate continuity through a cut to another angle on them. The frame holds no obvious clue to where attention should be focused, and consequently our attention shifts to the act of viewing itself; we become increasingly mindful of the hand of the filmmaker as the absorptive potential of the illusory presentation loosens and we begin to think, instead, about watching.

Having filled the screen, the titles now fade out, once again exposing the building to view. Then the sound of a door opening and shutting, followed by that of a gate – the gate next to the large bush where a woman has just appeared. She, too, walks off along the pavement. The occasional soft bump and scrape (still sounding extremely close to us) provide a clue, to the observant, that all is not as it seems, but the temporal characteristics of the shot serve to incrementally distance the viewer from the unfolding – and otherwise plausible – diegetic world. Two minutes have passed. The sound of wood pigeons. Someone rides towards us on a bike and disappears out of shot. Then, very close to us, a man's voice suddenly asks: "Alors?" ('Well?'), and is answered by a woman's voice, "Rien" ('Nothing'). "C'était où?" ('Where was it?'). "Dans un sac plastique dans la porte", she replies ('In a plastic bag on the porch').

The proximity of this intimate dialogue demands an immediate and radical re-interpretation by the viewer and can most readily be explained by conceiving of an expanded diegetic space; someone else is also watching 'our' screen. The use of sound in this context therefore constitutes an anti-illusionist, metafilmic device which, in prompting the envisioning of a hypodiegetic dimension to the narrative, evokes a consciously self-referential attitude on the part of the viewer. The motivation for this reflexive mode of viewing is reinforced by the sound of footsteps on a carpeted floor and a door opening as the shot cuts to a tighter, exterior frame, from a new angle, of a man coming through a front door and stepping outside. We recognize the street but it is darker now and there are different cars parked outside the building; this is a new scene. The man (Georges) crosses the road and stands at the narrow junction puzzling over the vantage point from which the previous wide shot could have been taken. His state of confusion matches our own, an empathy which, after more than three minutes of intriguingly (or perhaps for some, frustratingly) little information, elicits a strong sense of identification and involvement.

We return to the familiar, opening wide shot and are now completely absorbed in the mystery that is simultaneously unfolding both to us and to the fictive characters. By recruiting the distancing effect of the long-take to the service of his script, Haneke has engineered a paradoxically illusory experience which is contingent upon the reflexivity that results from a denial of knowledge at both the diegetic and discourse levels. And then, without warning, the image is interrupted by a number of horizontal fault lines. For a split second we assume that there is a problem with the projection and are propelled out of the fiction, so far out, in fact, as to resort to rationalizing our experience in terms of real-world, real-life logic rather than that of either a diegetic or hypodiegetic perspective. It takes a distinct moment or two for us to realize that the picture has slipped into fast-forward and must itself be read as hypodiegtic. For the second time in the opening four minutes of the film, which has constituted only two shots, the filmmaker has constructed an anti-illusionist device through a metareferential strategy designed, paradoxically, to immediately re-engage the audience more completely in the film-viewing experience. In conflicting strenuously with our conceptual understanding of what is being presented, new sensory information prompts, what I refer to as, a double-take response, a radical and abrupt reconfiguring of our relationship with both the screen and with the film world. In this moment we are forced not only

to consciously acknowledge the presence of other viewers within the fiction, and the role of the filmmaker, but also to recognize the presence of a mediating voyeur in the diegesis. The fast-forward device reveals the wide shot to be a subjective, point-of-view, surveillance shot, recorded by someone – an un-named character – for reasons yet unknown. We have been looking through the eyes not only of the filmmaker and the speaking characters but also of an interlocutor.

From this moment on, the ontological status of the film/ed image is neither certain nor reliable. The presumed objectivity of the image has been subverted and revealed as subjective. For the viewer, it is now consciously objectified as the perspective of an other. The fictional world of the opening few minutes of *Caché* and the nature of the screen-spectator contract that it establishes, have been fractured. We are no longer 'in the moment' (a phrase often used by a director on set) but have been shunted across into the slipstream of a parallel, diegetic dimension, and yet, despite this dislocation, we are now more intrigued and absorbed by the film than ever. The thriller subtext of this voyeuristic, alternative fictional line further heightens the immersive experience despite us not yet fully understanding the more complex narrative construct. And this subtext is itself reinforced by the unsettling knowledge that we can no longer know whether this shot (and potentially others in the film) is live or prerecorded, in the context of narrative time.

It is only as the sequence develops that we realize that, instead of being outside the house, as we initially assumed, we have been viewing the wide shot (since the beginning of the film) from inside the house in the shot, watching a prerecorded tape of the exterior of that house on the TV that belongs to its inhabitants. What had initially been (mis)taken for the diegetic level is now revealed to be hypodiegetic, a device which Wolf refers to as the "missing opening frame" (2006: 315f.). Or, as Grossvogel puts it, "what seemed to be the start of a narrative becomes suddenly an object within the narrative" (2007: 40). The voices we have heard belong to these inhabitants who are also (voyeuristically) watching the tape of their own house and (like us) are puzzling over who might have recorded it and why.

So the effect of this momentary collapsing of the initial illusory experience and the fleeting, extreme distanciation that this evokes is to re-engage and immerse us more completely in a reconfigured narrative construct. But this is a high-risk strategy on the part of the director, requiring a degree of manipulative skill that can as easily frustrate as

reel-in the audience. Yet this very risk taking also adds to the enjoyment of being manipulated. By amplifying the disparity between the extremes of complete distance and total immersion in the film world, this objectification of the image operates to intensify our subsequent involvement. And here it is the narratological framework itself that is redesigned to achieve this. The apparent rupturing of narrative time momentarily conveys a degree of lived-world authenticity to the context and so to the image, a quality generally associated with documentary rather than fiction. This afilmic[2] aspect is instrumental in throwing us out of the fiction and yet immediately re-engages us in the broader fictional possibility that its profilmic aspect has been effected not (only) by the filmmaker but by a fictional character, a surrogate voyeur. So it is by splicing together seemingly veridical, afilmic, objective documented footage with conventionally sourced, profilmic, subjective fictional material, that Haneke is able to orchestrate a transposition between different registers of aesthetic illusion and to manipulate the immersive experience of each.

Having seeded this intimate relationship between levels of subjectivity in the mind of the viewer, Haneke revisits it several times during the film, most affectingly for a scene in which a character commits suicide. As a childhood friend of Georges, Majid is presented as the most likely suspect to have had Georges's house under video surveillance. When confronted at his low-rent flat, Majid is convincingly innocent of any such filming but his protestations are dismissed by Georges, who threatens Majid if he does not stay away. After Georges has left, the scene in Majid's flat is replayed for the viewer from a new camera angle, in a single take, as if it had been filmed through a hidden lens or by someone unseen standing in the room[3]. This is also the

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[2] The term 'afilmic' applies to anything that has not been placed for the camera, that is, the world as we inhabit it, or "Life as it is", as Dziga Vertov terms it (qtd. Vlada 1978: 30). The term 'profilmic', by contrast, applies to anything that is placed in order to be filmed by the camera. (This is usually everything in the case of fiction films but includes actors, props, etc.) It is the idea of the afilmic as preexisting the arrival of the camera in which the veridical quality of documentary resides.

[3] The identity of the presumed voyeur is not revealed in the film, and the narrative impossibility of the inexplicable repetition of the scene with Majid suggests that there is no 'voyeur' as such. As a filmmaker renowned for his political conscience as much as for his formalist critique of cinema, Haneke is concerned at least as much with social and cultural comment as he is with cinematic form – in this case concerning the pervasive nature of the lens in society.

camera perspective that later films Majid committing suicide in front of Georges, who has specifically and unwittingly been invited to witness the event.

It is worth noting that the objective quality of Haneke's replayed surveillance material is also partly effected (as in the opening sequence) by the use of long, uncut takes. Increasingly rare – and therefore visible – as an element of the standardized syntax of mainstream cinema[4], the temporality of these shots draws the viewer's attention, raises questions as to their purpose or function and so heightens conscious awareness of the act of viewing. The resulting distanciation can be useful in conveying a sense of alienation or loneliness in a character or situation, so, in drawing our attention to the artifice of the filmmaking process, Haneke (paradoxically) fractures the aesthetic illusion to serve the narrative. But the purpose of the long-take is two-fold as it also functions to foreground Haneke's politicized concerns with the impossibility of a filmic presentation of truth. As he famously said at Cannes in 2005 (paraphrasing Godard), "film is 24 lies per second"[5], and his trademark use of the long-take – rooting the audience in the authenticity of a continuous time and place – emphatically denies the possibility of deception by implicitly acknowledging the capacity of the cut to deceive. This authenticity, this truthfulness is fundamental to all aesthetic illusion although, ironically, it is most often conveyed in film – even in documentary – through the (disrupting) conventions of discontinuous shooting and the consequent necessary use of continuity editing to create what is accepted as a diegetically coherent scene.

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4 The median shot length in *Avatar* is around three seconds (see http://www.cinemetrics.lv/database.php?sort=year) but in the first four and a half minutes of *Caché* there are only two cuts.

5 Jean-Luc Godard's now famous dictum is said by the character Bruno Forestier in Godard's first movie, *Le Petit Soldat* (1963). The full quote is: "La photographie, c'est la vérité, et le cinéma, c'est vingt-quatre fois la vérité par seconde." ('Photography is truth, and cinema is truth 24 times per second.') Haneke subverted this sentiment during a press conference for *Caché* at the Festival International du Film de Cannes in 2005. His full phrase was: "I always say that film is 24 lies per second at the service of the truth or at the service of the attempt to find the truth."

2. The Bistable Image as a Means of Eliciting and Exploring Illusionist Responses (Haneke, *Code inconnu*)

In an earlier film, Haneke exploits the visibility of the camera in a different yet similarly Brechtian manner to destabilize the aesthetic illusion he has established. *Code Inconnu: récit incomplet de divers voyages* (2000) ('Code Unknown: Incomplete Tales of Several Journeys') tells the fragmented stories of a number of characters whose lives loosely interconnect. They include: a Romanian refugee who has entered France illegally, a young French African who teaches in a school for the deaf, and Anne, an actress, played by Juliette Binoche. Each discrete sequence in this film is separated from the next by a momentary (and sometimes abrupt) cut to black, and it is following one of these black interludes that we first see a semi-derelict, windowless room and hear Anne arriving at what seems to be a rehearsal. The unseen film director tells her to play the scene straight to the camera that he is using to shoot the rehearsal. This camera lens, however, is also the lens that is being used to shoot the film we are watching so that Binoche also addresses us directly. Anne has, of course, learnt her lines and agrees to the director reading the part of the male character. He abruptly tells her that the door is now locked and she cannot get out. She seems momentarily taken aback and confused by what he has said, so he tells her again. Anne's involuntary smile reiterates her confusion and she asks him again to explain what he means.

In the absence of an "Action" call, it is not immediately clear to the audience that – or even whether – the scene of the embedded film has begun to be played out. So, unsure of the status of the unfolding action, we watch Anne's rising panic in the face of her kidnapper's cool, calculating insistence that the room is completely sealed, that there is no escape and that this is where she will die when the sealed room becomes a gas chamber.

Binoche's portrayal of complete disintegration into a trapped and terrified woman is so convincing that we are able to flip intellectually and emotionally between seeing her as Anne playing the part of someone who has been kidnapped, and seeing her as Anne who has been duped into coming to the rehearsal of a film (called *The Collector*, perhaps a remake of the 1965 William Wyler film of John Fowles's novel of the same title) only to be incarcerated by a psychopath purporting to be the film's director. The bistability of this duplicitous position is sustained throughout the scene by a combination of

Haneke's direction and Binoche's extraordinary performance so that we oscillate between the (dis)comfort of one illusory aesthetic and the parallel universe of the other. But Haneke's writing is also key in this manipulation. After all, the invented reality of a film set – a man, a camera, a dilapidated room in some semi-derelict building – is as convincing a scenario for a murderous psychopath as it is for a director striving to achieve veracity in an actor's performance. This intentional ambiguity of the script is fundamental to the fracturing of the original aesthetic illusion, once again forcing us to resituate the diegesis within the broader, reflexive context of an alternative, hypodiegetic, narrative structure. Both possibilities hover alongside each other, both equally plausible and credible as aesthetic illusions, that is, as internally logical constructs. In Wolf's terms, the available inventory serves both worlds equally well so that the principles of perspectivity and consistency do not conflict (cf. 2009: 151f.). But both perspectives are also overlaid by the enjoyment of ambiguity, an uncertainty on the part of the spectator about a predetermined consequence of the continued suturing of these two aesthetic real(is)ms.

There are clear parallels to be drawn, both phenomenologically and cognitively, between the response to this kind of bistable aesthetic illusion and the perceptual experience of seeing a bistable, optical figure, such as the duck/rabbit image (cf. Jastrow 1899: 312)[6]. In both cases it is the carefully designed, inherent ambiguity of the stimulus which elicits the unstable experience, prompting the observer to oscillate between perceptual aspects and to exert some control over that process. Every detail of the stimulus – each mark on the page of the duck/rabbit drawing, every nuance of facial expression of the actress, that is, every feature of the macro-frame employed (to use Wolf's terminology, cf. 2009: 152) – must be interpretable in both aspects. Once again the device of the long-take is a critical element of this directorial strategy, as it allows time for the content of the frame to be 'seen-as' both its perceptual alternatives.

The activity of 'seeing-as' can be defined, therefore, as the perceiving of a particular aspect of an ambiguous stimulus which itself may be interpreted in two or more ways. It is essentially the task of

[6] It should be noted that the duck/rabbit figure is ambiguous, i. e. is open to more than one interpretation but is not illusory because it does not give rise to a false belief or perception; the two perceptual aspects are both grounded in the stimulus and therefore continually available to perception.

seeing or intending to see one thing as or in preference to another, and accounts for the discrepancy between the physical form of an ambiguous object and its appearance to perception. Since the sensory input remains constant, any 'flip' between one perceived aspect and the other can be presumed to be attributable to mental processes of the imagination, and the phenomenon has long been studied by visual neuroscientists interested in the relation between the sensory (bottom-up) and cognitive (top-down) components of perceptual experience. Triggered by a visually ambiguous stimulus, 'seeing-as' is considered a form of imaginative perception and is thought to lie at the heart of aesthetic perception. By incorporating a degree of sensory ambiguity within the frame, the skillful filmmaker is able to explore and exploit the intricate relationship between attributions of illusory fiction and reality underpinning our interpretation of a film. By manipulating our belief in an illusionist representation, Haneke exposes the very mechanisms eliciting illusion. In both *Caché* and *Code Inconnu* this embedded level of ambiguity resides, ultimately, in the structure of the narrative so it is perhaps interesting to consider to what extent a narrative framework is fundamental to achieving such incisive directorial influence. As will be shown in what follows, certain experimental and avant-garde films present precisely the opportunity to examine the consequences of using metafilmic techniques to fracture an aesthetic illusion that has been established without recourse to a structuring narrative.

3. The Undermining and Simultaneous Deepening of Aesthetic Illusion in Ambiguous, Experimental Film Sequences

Commercial cinema relies for its appreciation on prior knowledge of relevant cultural norms and of conventions governing the developing diegesis. In their quest to strip the filmmaking process down to its fundamental principles, the tendency of many experimental filmmakers, by contrast, has been to employ structural frameworks and visual devices which subvert dominant forms and intentionally disrupt conventional viewing in order to expose the perceptual mechanisms on which film viewing depends. A study of experimental work (both in the scientific and cinematic domains) concerned with visual perception, and in particular with perceptual ambiguity, may suggest that the experience of aesthetic illusion requires the sensory and cognitive

(psycho-emotional) registers of perception to be aligned. That is to say that, as has been highlighted in relation to Haneke's work, if either of these perceptual registers is disrupted, then the illusion is fractured and immersion abruptly ceases. By exploiting forms beyond the conventions of structuring narrative, the examples of ambiguous, experimental film sequences that follow evidence that narrative is unnecessary not only for the experience of immersion but also in the fracturing of an aesthetic illusion and the reinstatement of its alternative aspect through the kind of double-take affects being considered in this essay. These examples also provide further insight into the mechanics and potential of optically disruptive techniques as directorial tools for the filmmaker.

3.1. *Man with the Movie Camera*

An interesting example of this concern with what underpins the relationship between the moving image and its reception is evident in a film by Dziga Vertov, made in 1929. Considered one of the most innovative and influential films of the silent era, *Man with the Movie Camera* presents, in Vertov's own on-screen words seen during the title sequence of the film, "an experiment in the cinematic communication of visible events". Filmed by his brother (Mikhail Kauffman)[7], this highly experimental documentation of everyday Soviet life appropriates the full gamut of optical, cinematic possibilities available at the time (mirroring Vertov's evident delight in the technological advancements of the age), and here again we find an example of a metafilmic technique which disrupts the illusory experience of the viewer only to re-centre them in an embedded illusory reality.

Among the myriad, fleeting snapshots of people going about their daily lives, we are introduced to an editor, Elizaveta Svilova (Vertov's wife), working at a Moviola editing desk. The filmstrips that she is working on constitute the footage we see in the film: wide shots of street bustle, the modern machinery of pre-war urban Russia, close-ups of the faces of women and children. During the sequence of this editor at work we see sections of these filmstrips displayed on a lightbox, the detail of

[7] Mikhail himself is filmed by the (uncredited) Glab Troyanski as he wanders the streets with his camera and tripod filming the multitude of everyday life. Mikhail is therefore the 'man with the movie camera', and in playing the title role occupies the status of (the only discernible) 'character' in the film.

several, sequential frames clearly visible. Despite being framed wholly within the screen, the stilled, individual frames of the filmstrip resonate like photographs, caught moments through which we feel we are allowed privileged access to, and so become absorbed in, a 'reality' which would otherwise be unavailable to us. And despite – or perhaps because of – the film's energy and pace, it is at these stilled moments that we become most immersed in this embedded world, when we are afforded the time to scrutinize individual faces and wonder at the lives they represent. But then suddenly these static frames are reanimated, presented now full frame as if running both through the Moviola viewer and the screening projector. The effect of this animating moment is to jolt the viewer from the reverie of their immersive state into the palpable immediacy of the mechanics of the filmmaking process – precisely what Vertov seeks to foreground. Once again visual information momentarily conflicts with understanding and a double-take reaction is evoked. This distancing effect is secured both by the animating of the action within the frame (a metareference to the filmmaking apparatus) and by the reframing of the filmed image, from being contained within the viewable screen as part of a filmstrip to occupying the entire screen space. But despite these reflexive devices, the close-up of a human face, a caught expression, the indexical link with historical time, is sufficient to capture attention, evoke a powerful sense of identification and immerse the viewer in that moment. The antagonistic forces of distanciation and immersion therefore hover precariously in equilibrium as the viewer flips between the available discourse levels.

These moments in the film also serve to remind the audience that objects move on the screen only by virtue of being presented as sequential static images, and so hint at the perceptual foundations on which the entire hierarchy of film's illusionism rests. This is the fundamental conceptual quandary that lies at the heart of any discussion of illusionism within the realm of film – the perception of apparent motion[8] – and is exploited to even greater immersive effect in a much

[8] As is well known, the 'moving-image' of film arises from the sequential presentation of still images, and it is only the combining of the mechanics of the mode of presentation and our perceptual processing which imparts the sensation of movement onto these static frames. Arguments proposing that persistence of vision is an explanation of this phenomenon have been largely discredited, despite their persistence.

more recent film by the experimental filmmaker and academic, Malcolm Le Grice, again without recourse to any structuring narrative.

3.2. *Little Dog for Roger*

Made by means of the serial reprinting, by hand, of a looped strip of 9.5 mm, 1950's home-movie footage, *Little Dog for Roger* (Le Grice 1967) was instrumental in defining the emerging structuralist/materialist concerns of the London Filmmakers' Coop. By containing the outer edges, frame lines and sprocket holes of the original filmstrip within the projected frame, Le Grice's film situates the filmstrip as the object of attention, emphasizing its materiality by focusing the viewer's awareness on the celluloid itself. Whenever possible the film is screened as a double projection (see Illustration 2) so that initially two streams of blurry images rush vertically through the frame (as might be seen if the shutter or claw mechanism is removed from a projector). Then recognizable shapes begin to emerge from the confusion of a passing landscape until, finally, an image is momentarily 'caught' and the anti-illusionist effect of the formal, metafilmic construct abruptly recedes into the background.

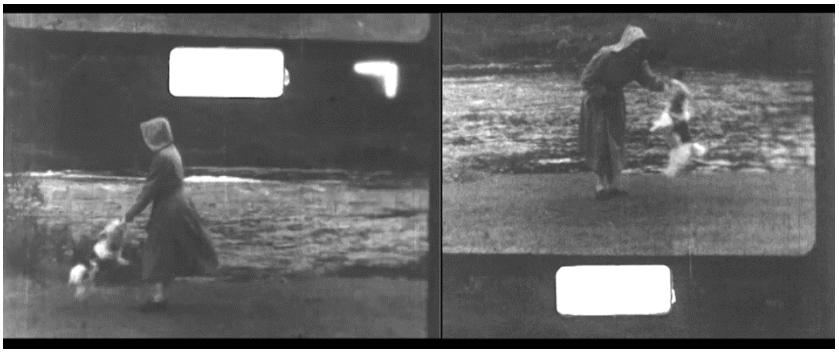

Illustration 2: Frame enlargement from the film Little Dog for Roger. *With kind permission of the filmmaker.*

This caught image is of a small dog frozen, fleetingly, in full gallop, – Muybridge-esque before being released to continue on its frantic way to rejoin its female owner before being caught again at a later point in the action. The scene of this small, scruffy dog and its joyous reunion with the young woman (who occasionally glances toward the camera in the self-conscious manner so reminiscent of early home-movie) is repeated in a gradually extending loop so that a little more of the woman

and dog playing tug together is shown each time. This repeating loop is subjected to a range of anti-illusionist treatments including changes in exposure, focus, orientation, contrast and speed and is also interspersed with scratched leader and spacer. Yet the overall degree of absorption or illusory engagement by the viewer is – I would argue – stronger, not *despite* but *because of* the momentary loosening of the illusionist hold which renders the film's overall affect akin to rifling through an assemblage of precious memories. Le Grice's film is particularly interesting in this regard because of its unique combining of intensely personal and therefore immersively powerful content (which is also essentially realist, i. e. documentary in origin) and the home-movie aesthetic – a deeply nostalgic, metafilmic form of presentation. Much as in *Man with the Movie Camera*, the incessant, anti-illusionist techniques operate as if to privilege access to intermittent glimpses of a life that is as private as it is anonymous, compelling immersion (and the desire to be immersed) in the represented world.. Rather than obstructing engagement and the urge to decipher and connect with a scratchy, home-movie world of some by-gone era, the metareferential interventions of the filmmaker heighten the value of these caught moments and so their potential to engender an immersive experience. As with Haneke's *Caché*, the denial of information, the perpetuation of ambiguity serves – however paradoxically – to reinforce and deepen the aesthetic illusion.

The canon of experimental and avant-garde film offers fertile ground in which to interrogate broader concepts of reception, interactivity and spectatorship, and Le Grice's film is particularly interesting with regard to the effect of temporal characteristics of the filmic text on the experiences of illusory engagement and full immersion. It could be argued, for example, that *Little Dog for Roger* allows the viewer to become repeatedly absorbed in the represented world but that the anti-illusionist techniques employed deny the establishment of a stable aesthetic illusion and so persistently frustrate any prolonged immersive experience. This would suggest that the presentation of a convincing aesthetic illusion (and any consequent immersion) is only possible if it is maintained over time, for example by means of a structuring narrative. However, what I am arguing, on the contrary, is that *Little Dog for Roger* evidences that this is not necessarily the case and, moreover, that there are instances in which apparently anti-illusionist techniques can function in reverse, precisely to reinforce engagement in an alternative aspect of the illusion they are designed to fracture.

The film's content presumably remains secondary for Le Grice, but in a brief departure from the rigours of structuralism and materialism, he later said about his work: "I have come to realize that my main interest is in creating experiences rather than concepts. Ideas emerge from sensation, from colour, image, sound, movement and time." (Turim 2009: 531). Concerned with the material constituents of film and its reception, Le Grice's film operates at the perceptual margins of the film-viewing experience, exploiting the components of a medium which inform the relationship between the visual and the psycho-emotional/cognitive. In juxtaposing the nostalgic lure of home-movie footage with fracturing materialist techniques, Le Grice succeeds (like Vertov before him) in maintaining a precarious balance between the distanciation inflicted by the film's form and a delightful absorption in the nostalgic world of a small, happy dog.

For the viewer, the effect of Le Grice's film is not as perceptually arresting as is the use of a similar device in *Caché* although both techniques exploit altered frame rates and thereby reference the fundamental principles of apparent motion in their execution. I suggest this is in part related to the element of surprise whose effect is undermined by the less conventional visual style of Le Girce's film. The last film I will discuss offers yet another technique by which to immersively engage the viewer and evoke a deceptively powerful double-take response the constructed duplicity of the lens.

3.3. *Mirror*

In his film *Mirror*, the American artist Robert Morris offers a brilliantly effecting (and affective) example of the fracturing of aesthetic illusion within the realm of experimental film. The film is comprised of two long-takes of a snowy landscape filmed with a shaky, hand-held feel by Babette Mangolte. Despite this movement the camera is in fact on a tripod and is pointing at a large, hand-held mirror which, in the first shot, circles around the camera. The legs and gloved hands of the person holding the mirror (Robert Morris) are sometimes visible at the edges of the filmed frame but the reflection of the camera operator is kept out of the shot. The film becomes particularly interesting in aesthetic terms towards the end of the first shot and the beginning of the second when the frame of the camera (and so the projected screen image) is predominantly limited to placement within the edges of the mirror. During this section of the film, the image is seen-as an unmediated

picture of the landscape (both perceptually and conceptually), not because of any particular, inherent stability in the image but simply as a default reading since no information to the contrary is available. But the viewer experiences a palpable fracturing of the relationship between sensory and cognitive components of the viewing process – and therefore a breaking of the aesthetic illusion – at moments when the edge of the frame is compromised by seeing the edge of the mirror. This sudden perceptual shift is a consequence of Morris disrupting another foundational principle on which film viewing depends, that of the physical integrity of the filmed frame, and so perceptually challenging our conceptual assumptions about what is fixed or given in terms both of the filmic apparatus and the rules of screen-spectator engagement. Much as when the opening shot of *Caché* suddenly slips into fast-forward, this new sensory information about the frame edge catapults the viewer out of the represented world of the film and demands that we interpret the shot as a reflection of the landscape, as a picture or second-order representation rather than as a 'direct', filmed presentation of that landscape.

In the brief moment that conceptual understanding lags behind perceptual knowledge, the original aesthetic illusion breaks and a double-take response is experienced by the viewer – that is, the reflex-like urge to look again and to reconfigure our understanding of what is presented. The mirror reflection aspect takes a moment to 'see', despite what is conceptually known by this stage about the film's mode of production, and even once seen is not easy to sustain, so viewers often experience a flipping between the two available interpretations of the screen – a truly bistable stimulus.

For most of the film, the camera operator is kept out of the shot, that is, out of her own reflection. But on the brief occasions when the camera is caught in shot, the perceptual confusion about what is reflected and what is direct or incident is made particularly acute by the camera's gaze which is directed back at the viewer by the mirror. As we watch Babette Mangolte and her focus puller, crouched over a tripod operating the camera, not only do we seem to be looking directly at her but she appears to look directly at – and therefore to be filming – us, even though we know (but cannot see) that we are looking not at her but at her reflection in Morris's mirror. Somewhere in this scenario the viewer forgets that the content of the frame is being controlled not by the camera operator but by the mirror operator and might even begin to

wonder whether a cut to a shot of what the camera is pointing at (i. e., a reverse shot) might allow them to suddenly see themselves.

What confuses the viewer is not *what* they are looking at but *how* they are looking at it, and this is accentuated by the added disparity between the romantic naturalism of the scene and the artificiality of the mechanisms by which we view that scene. Morris's device is, in a sense, a special effect (SFX), a visible, explicit cinematic illusion, except that it functions in reverse. Rather than operating as an integral part of the filmic world, creating and intensifying the immersive experience of a fictional representation and rendering the seemingly impossible convincingly plausible (as with the fantastical worlds of *Pan's Labyrinth*, for example, or *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*), here the device punctures and makes visible that hermetically sealed, represented capsule, setting up a dialectic between knowledge of the physical world and (the absence of) knowledge about how it can now look this way.

In both *Mirror* and *Caché,* alternative conceptualizations of what is presented are demanded but are temporarily unclear, causing conflict between what is seen and what is understood. This conflict (or inconsistency) underpins the double-take response which marks the moment when the illusion-generating principle of consistency (cf. Wolf 2006: 151) is ruptured and immersion in one illusion is subsumed by immersion in another.

4. Conclusion

Film's illusory capacity, that is, its capacity to give rise to a deceptive appearance and the willful suspension of disbelief in the reality of its represented world**,** lies in its ability to fuse the perceptual and intellectual registers of our viewing experience. The fracturing of this aesthetic illusion is contingent upon the destabilizing of and consequent need to reconfigure this sensory/cognitive relationship. The disruption of conceptual knowledge, and the expectations founded on it, by new sensory information prompts an acknowledgement by the viewer of their original misinterpretation and can give rise to a double-take reaction.

The act of being manipulated by a directorial mind that is able to reconfigure the framework of one's experience of the presented reality is extremely seductive. Our desire to be (and enjoyment of being)

manipulated is exploited by writers in all art forms to intensify our immersive involvement in the worlds they create. This is the power of aesthetic illusion in any medium, but the particular form of illusory manipulation that has been discussed in this essay is notable for the prescribed ambivalence of the representation and the skillful use of devices designed to intentionally fracture engagement in one aspect of the illusion while deepening engagement in the alternative illusory aspect. The technique depends on the control of immersion through the fine-tuning of the tension between the desire to be absorbed and the enjoyment of being knowingly manipulated. And, as we have seen, the work of filmmakers who experiment with these perceptual concerns often demands a different kind of engagement in the process of viewing; in the words of William Wees (paraphrasing the American avant-garde filmmaker, Stan Brakhage), we are invited "to take film in instead of being taken in by it**"** (1992: 81).

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